Who's That Knocking at the Door?
Hebrews 12:1-2
October 31, 1976

John M. Buchanan
Broad Street Presbyterian Church
Columbus, Ohio

Text: "...we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses." Hebrews 12:1

A Sermon for All Saints' Day

One of the fringe benefits of extended automobile travel with a family which includes teen-agers is forced familiarity with the music of youth culture. Some would question whether or not that is a benefit: I confess that I am not a willing listener. But after a full day of it, some of the words get through in spite of our best efforts to ignore them. One of the songs which penetrated my reluctant mind last summer, and which I must have heard several hundred times, is a simple piece written by Paul McCartney, an erstwhile Beatle. The tune is childish: the harmonics elementary - but the words, after fifty or so hearings, caught my attention:

"Someone's knockin' at the door,
Someone's ringin' the bell.
Do me a favor, open the door and let 'em in.

Sister Suzie, Brother John, Martin Luther, Phil and Don
Brother Michael, Auntie Gin,
Open the door and let 'em in."

I don't know whether that's nonsense and McCartney a master at exploiting the naivete and wealth of American adolescence, or whether he is seriously trying to make a statement of sorts. The latter suits my purposes this morning. It is at least possible that the song is a recital of the names of people who were important to the writer, and that he is inviting us to open the door and let a few of these types - these "saints" - into our lives. If so, it's a good idea.

One of the peculiarities of our age has been the end of the hero-heroine, Hollywood style. We have suffered through the painful and traumatic demise of political heroes. Even the athlete, whose feats on the field and purity of heart off used to cause a shiver of delight in every young fan is unequivical today in the matter of that inner-drive, that relentless motivation which makes a superstar. Behold - it is money. A mark of this peculiar phenomenon is the emergence of the anti-hero, the hapless victim of fate and circumstance whose only triumph in life is to muddle through, barely. Perhaps McCartney is advising us to something different:- to go back and reclaim something we seem to have lost, namely, those persons whose influence on us has been and can be again, positive and healthy and inspiring. Perhaps it is a secular invitation to affirm what the church has always attempted to affirm in the Doctrine of the Communion of Saints. If not, it should be.

Whatever happened to the Communion of Saints? Someone, at some time, must have believed in it and understood what it meant. What happened to it was the Protestant Reformation. On October 31, 1517, an Augustinian Monk by the name of Martin Luther marched up to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenburg and nailed thereon 95 Theses which he wished to debate with anyone interested. Sainthood has not been the same since. Interestingly, Luther chose October 31 because it was the Eve of All Saints' Day and many people would be coming to the church for the unusual festivities which would be taking place. On All Saints' Day the year before Frederick the Wise's Collection of sacred relics had gone on display. In the

collection was a thorn from the crown of Christ, one tooth of St. Jerome, four pieces of St. Chrysostom, four hairs of our Lady, seven pieces of her veil sprinkled with the blood of Christ: the relics of Christ included a piece of His swaddling cloths, a wisp of straw, a strand of His beard, a piece of the bread eaten at the Last Supper, a chunk of the stone from which He ascended to Heaven and a twig from Moses' burning bush. By 1520 the collection included 19,013 holy relics. If a Christian viewed them on All Saints' Day and made a contribution he or she was granted Indulgences - reductions in time to be spent in purgatory up to a maximum of 1,902,202 years and 270 days. (This information from Here I Stand, Roland Bainton, p.53).

The idea of Indulgences grew out of the belief that Jesus and the Saints had accumulated more merit than they needed to enter Heaven. This excess merit was kept in a Heavenly repository and was available to common folk - for a price. Luther's 95 Theses attacked the practice and its theological rationale.

Following the initial break of the Reformation, Protestants reacted strenuously to the practices of Romanism which they found most objectionable, particularly this matter of Indulgences and its relationship to the Saints. The trouble was, in many instances they over-reacted. Mobs of angry new Protestants trashed some of the most magnificent Cathedrals in Christendom. Icons and statues were hauled into the streets, pictures were burned, windows smashed, stone screens demolished bit by bit. Every last vestige of Sainthood was rooted out. Western civilization was deprived, in the process, of some of its most glorious art. And Protestant Christianity for centuries was deprived of a very important idea.

We are, I have come to believe, poorer for it. Our Protestant Faith assures us that we don't have to buy Indulgences to release our relatives from purgatory: nor do we need to pray for the dead. But because of the zeal of Protestantism to put measurable distance between itself and Rome, we find it awkward and embarassing even to mention the Saints who have gone before us. How sad that we aren't comfortable celebrating the past and the continuing influence of those who - in the words of our Worshipbook "having lived this life in life, now live eternally with you."

J. Harry Cotton began a funeral sermon from this pulpit last summer by saying, "If I have any clarity in Christian doctrine it isn't from reading theology, but from knowing Christian people." How very true, I thought, as I listened to him relate how he had grown as a Christian because of his friendship with the person whose funeral it was. How very true, and how sad that as Protestants we don't say it and celebrate and rejoice in it - in worship. What a list of Saints this congregation has behind it: what a "cloud of witnesses" surround us every time we come into the Sanctuary. This Church is what it is because of them: we didn't simply happen in 1970 - or 1940 or 1910 or even 1890. We are who we are because of our Saints - Adair, Copeland, Marsten, Palmer.

The Apostles' Creed includes it as an item of faith..."We believe in the Communion of Saints". The word for Communion - "Koinonia" - is one of the most beautiful in the Greek language, William Barclay suggests. In Greek it was used to describe the relationship of marriage. Plato employed it to describe societal relationships; Aristotle used it politically. It described friendship between two persons and, finally, fellowship between an individual and God. It means mutuality, togetherness, sharing - communion. "Saints" is simply what the New Testament calls Christians. Special merit, piety, righteousness have nothing to do with it: a Saint is a believer in Jesus Christ, a member of His Church.

At its very simplest level the Communion of Saints indicates the way Christians love and take care of one another. That loving and caring were what was so very conspicuous in the early Church. They shared what they had: no one was hungry or in need. To be in the Church was to be in a fellowship of friends who were for one another. It was their best evangelism, apparently. People saw what was going on and were drawn to it. "See how they love one another," they said.

The Communion of Saints reminds us that all we have to show the world, really, is a new quality of relationship. It is a sober indictment of impersonality and coldness and unfriendliness whenever and wherever they characterize "Church". It is judgment when we allow "Church" to mean an organization to which we belong rather than people we are learning to love. Barclay put it sharply: "A Church which has forgotten not the obligation but the privilege of sharing has lost the mark of a Christian Church." (The Apostles' Creed for Everyone, p.294).

At its simplest level the Communion of Saints means we believe, as an item of religious conviction, in loving and caring for one another. It means, also, that the Koinonia, the fellowship to which we belong in Jesus Christ, exists beyond the boundaries of geography. The doctrine stands in sharp opposition to the provincialism which seems inevitably, to accompany our religion. It forces the member of this particular parish to acknowledge his or her part in the United Presbyterian Church, the Protestant faith, the Christian family in every country in the world. It lifts our vision to see God's will of one world and one family of humanity.

The Doctrine also would lift us above the confines of time and set us in relationship with those who have gone before us. We have trouble with this dimension. Our culture seems temporarily fascinated with the occult - that cosmic nonsense into which Americans insist on pouring millions of dollars per year. And when anyone suggests a relationship with people who are no longer alive we react skeptically, for good reason.

And yet, Scripture does open a door to the past through which come some very real people: Peter, John, Mark, James, Paul: even those nameless souls in the Psalter who opened their hearts and minds to us, and with whom we still can identify. James Smart writes, "We were not ever intended by God to live on the frugal resources of our immediate circle or in the narrow confines of our local Christian Fellowship." (The Creed in Christian Teaching, p.205).

The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews reminded his readers of those who had gone before - Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses: men of faith who knew the promise and in their lives established the Community of Faith. "We are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses," he exclaimed. A young clergyman was disturbed and depressed because only three of his congregation appeared for a Communion Service. But he went ahead, albeit reluctantly, with the ritual. He came to that soaring prayer "with angels and archangels and with all the company of Heaven, we worship and adore Thy glorious Name." He paused - the wonder of it gripped him, and he said to himself, "God forgive me: I did not know I was in that company." (Barclay, The Apostles' Creed for Everyone, p.296).

Perhaps it used to be easier. Perhaps this doctrine made more sense in simpler times past. We live, not with angels, Saints, and the whole company of Heaven but with psychology, psychoanalysis and psychiatry for all. For far more than a generation we have lived under the influence of Sigmund Freud. We have learned, at first reluctantly and then with pleasure it seems, about our "shadow selves" which he called libodo and id. We learned about repressed desire and hidden impulses: we

confronted the frightening side of selfhood in which, he taught us, we contemplate murder and worse.

A lecturer told 400 ministers at Princeton this summer that we have spent our whole professional careers sitting at the feet of Freud, using up all our time and energy identifying the people we keep in the cellars and closets of our lives.

One of the results - and I think we're finally seeing it for what it is - has been a neurotic introspection. Ritualized self-revelation has become a therapeutic game of sorts in which the winner is the one who can tell the worst story about himself. And the measure of integrity, maturity and authenticity is the amount of pride of ownership we can generate at revealing our worst impulses. "Do your own thing - I've got to be me - be yourself" - the holy mantra of the 1970's - has often meant, "I intend to be just as mean, selfish, stubborn and unpleasant as I feel like being and if you don't like it - too bad!" In a remote sense the fixation on Freud has given us some fancy new names for what the Church has always called Original Sin. But instead of confession, forgiveness, absolution and new life, our generation seems to have concluded that it's a good idea not only to recognize what is wrong with us but to celebrate it and wallow in it.

Carlyle Marney, a delightful Southern Baptist, whose ministry is patching up lives of broken clergy and other Christians, suggests that it's all right to spook around in your cellar: it's all right to identify the people who are there and to know your "shadow self". But look up every now and then and see who's on your balcony. Don't spend your life between the plumbing and furnace and the trash heap waiting to be hauled out. Lift your sights. And you will see that the building which is your self, your personhood, includes some pretty fancy architecture if you come up out of the cellar to look at it. You've got a balcony, in fact, and on that balcony are strong and healthy and good influences. They have names. They are your Saints. They are your Saints with whom you should be in regular Koinonia - Communion. It may be, as Freud suggested, that there is a Hermann Goering or a Charles Manson downstairs. But Churchill and Bonhoeffer and Tom Dooley and Martin Luther King are up there on the balcony. "Open the door and let 'em in," Paul McCartney suggests.

"I believe in the Communion of Saints": so now, toward a recovery of that old and venerable idea. We move in the right direction as we reclaim and appreciate the past - our own past particularly. The "now" generation advises that if it isn't contemporary it isn't worth much. That's wrong, or course. Robert McAfee Brown writes: "Our forefathers could be wrong and frequently were. Sometimes they were brilliantly wrong, sometimes obstinately so...But before we dismiss them as wrong we must listen to them gratefully, for at many points they were right." (The Pseudonymous of God, p.20-21).

It's funny, the old saying goes, the way one's parents seem to be hopelessly obsolete and dim-witted when we are sixteen, yet they become suddenly very wise when we arrive at the age of twenty-three or so. That's part of the recovery - reclaiming and appreciating the past, particularly one's own past.

At the risk of sounding maudlin let me tell you a tiny piece of mine for which I am grateful. My grandfather was what a grandfather should be: a big man, with beautiful white hair and slightly rumpled shirts smelling of cigar smoke, and wintergreen candy in his coat pocket covered with Prince Albert pipe tobacco. He lived into his nineties: he was a presence in my life as infant, child, adolescent,

and as a young man I would visit him when I was home. The last time I saw him I was an ordained minister and my father insisted that I should pray with him which I found rather difficult to do. But I did it and as I left he waved in a jaunty fashion and said - "Till we meet again, Johnny," I know now what he meant. He was saying "I believe in the Communion of Saints."

Robert McAfee Brown wrote an essay when his friend and colleague David Roberts died. Now, Brown is a sophisticated theologian, rational, articulate. Yet he wrote - in a way I found very helpful: "I am simply not alone. I am surrounded by a cloud of witnesses, David preeminantly among them...Whatever the Communion of Saints means, it means at least this - that the fellowship of believers in Christ is not limited to time and space...For me such distinctions have now become quite inadequate - a new dimension has entered into my life. David's death brings me into an awareness of eternity that makes eternity wonderfully real." (op.cite p.159).

The Communion of Saints means that we are, in the words of Hebrews, "surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses." Some of them we know, some we have only heard of, some we don't know. Some are dead: some are alive. No matter: we are surrounded by them. They are the strong and good and gracious influences of the past. I'm aware of who they are for me - in this place. Every time I come into this Sanctuary at 11:00 o'clock on Sunday I know they are on the balcony for me: Marsten, Palmer, Cotton, Little, Kearns, Smith.

We believe in the Communion of Saints. Who are they for you? Identify them: name them: look up and wave at them. "Open the door and let 'em in!"

Amen.

Father, we are grateful for those who have gone before; those whose influence on us continues in good and creative ways. We are grateful for Your love, and for the promise that we are in fellowship with them all. We are grateful, Father, for one another and for that Communion into which You call us: in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.